© ЕУСПб, 2022. ISSN 2310-3817. Т. 12. № 1. p. 228–249

1 eng

Where is Spinoza's Free Multitude Now?

Aurelio Sainz Pezonaga

Adjunct Professor of Philosophy;
University of Castilla-La Mancha,
Department of Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, and Aesthetics;
Faculty of Education Sciences and Humanities.
Avenida de los Alfares, 44, 16071, Cuenca, Spain;
E-mail: Aurelio.Sainz@uclm.es

Where is Spinoza's Free Multitude Now?

Abstract:
Is Spinoza's notion of a free multitude of any use today? In discussion with the theories of Étienne Balibar on citizenship and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on the multitude, I propose the notion of a free multitude to think about current social movements' potential from a non-teleological and non-essentialist perspective. Balibar and Hardt and Negri support the idea that heterogeneity can itself produce collective action, showing Spinoza's influence on thinkers who are also scholars of his philosophy. The philosophical problem is then to think about how heterogeneity could be active or rational, since without rationality a free multitude cannot exist. My response to this problem works on the complex nature of the common desire for understanding, which is both positive impulse and realistic determination. Social movements can be free multitudes, common desires for understanding, singular things, and, therefore, impure events determined by cooperation and conflict. Insofar as social movements rationally desire cooperation prevail over conflict, they

will work with other free multitudes for the freedom of the entire multitude, attending to the material conditions of life in common and the real processes of social transformation.

Keywords:
Spinoza, free multitude, social movements, heterogeneity, common desire for understanding

> Waste. Waste. The watcher's eye put out, hands of the builder severed, brain of the maker starved / those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish / now at risk in this segregate republic / locked away out of sight and hearing, out of mind, shunted aside / those needed to teach, advise, / persuade, weigh arguments / those urgently needed for the work of perception / work of the poet, the astronomer, the historian, the architect of new streets / work of the speaker who also listens / meticulous delicate work of reaching the heart of the desperate woman, the desperate man /—never-to-be-finished, still unbegun work of repair—it cannot be done without them / and where are they now?
> (Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World,* I, IV)

In 1981, Antonio Negri published *The Savage Anomaly* (1991),[1] a study on Spinoza highlighting how important the notion of the multitude is to understand his political philosophy. Étienne Balibar (1994) responded four years later by asserting that the entirely positive character with which Negri characterizes the multitude does not reflect the critical distance with which Spinoza treats the vulgar, the crowd, or the multitude in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (*TTP*, 1999). Negri (1991: xix) also stresses the multitude's power (*potentia*) that, according to Spinoza in *Political Treatise* (*TP*, 2005), defines the common right of the state (imperium) (*TP* 2/17).[2] Balibar (1994: 5) emphasizes the fear of the masses, the fear they feel, and the fear they inspire in the state.

Negri and Balibar agree that political liberation can only be achieved through the multitude's collective actions. However, Bali-

[1] I refer here to the first published English translations.
[2] I cite *Political Treatise* / *Tractatus politicus* by chapter/article.

bar (ibid.: 11–15) was careful to affirm that according to Spinoza's *TTP* and *TP*, both liberation and political servitude are caused by the multitude. Thus, they reopened the debate on the masses' political value. Are the masses enemies of political freedom or are they the only ones capable of conquering it?

Although both scholars consider Spinoza's free multitude in their readings,[1] it was François Zourabichvili (2008: 71–72) who focused on the phrase itself. Zourabichvili considers the concept of "multitude" only complete if it maintains an internal relationship with freedom and that the notion of a subjugated multitude is a chimerical concept.[2] Moreover, he points to common desire as the grounding of the state' institution.

In this regard, if the common desire is the ground of the state institution, then we must think that there is a common, active, rational, and joyful desire: a common desire for understanding and the one that grounds the best *imperia*. Conversely, there is a common, passive, and sad desire, a common desire for ignoring (*TTP* 6: 81[3]), which explains the worst *imperia*. The first is the common desire that prevails in a free multitude, and the second is the one that dominates in a subjugated one.

The subjugated multitude in the *TP* is as much a multitude as the free one, although its *potentia* is far less. It is true that the subjugated multitude does not entirely correspond to either the savage multitude or the mob of the *TTP* (18: 227). In the *TTP*, the dominated maintain or promote their domination directly with their own acts, either fighting for the kings, and encouraging them (*TTP* Pr: 7),[4] being driven by superstitious anger (*TTP* 20: 244), or trying to abolish tyrannies without transforming the causes that produce them (*TTP* 18: 226–27). In the *TP,* however, the subjugated multitude is generally described in much more inert terms: being fearful,

[1] In fact, Negri's (1991: 201) multitude in *The Savage Anomaly* seems to correspond to a free one. In "Reliqua desiderantur: a conjecture for a definition of the concept of democracy in the final Spinoza" (2004 [1985]: 50–51), Negri thinks of the multitude as a contradictory relationship and a constructive struggle between absoluteness and freedom. Balibar (1994: 19; 2008: 121) says that the multitude can be a free or an active mass.

[2] I do not agree with Zourabichvili on this point. He seemed to read subjugated multitudes as if he believed that they disturb the order of nature rather than follow it (*TP* 2/6). Nonetheless, what we can say about free and subjugated multitudes is the same as Spinoza affirms of wise and ignorant men: they are part of nature, and whatever determines them to act must be referred to the power of nature insofar as it can be defined by the nature of this or that multitude (*TP* 2/5).

[3] I cite *Theologico-Political Treatise / Tractatus theologico-politicus* by the chapter number and, separated by a colon, the page of the Gebhardt edition without reference to the volume, which in this case is the third.

[4] Pr: *Praefatio*

avoiding death, serving by force those who have conquered them; and it is associated with loneliness or animality (*TP* 5/4–6).

In chapters V and VII of the *TP*, Spinoza speaks of the multitude, specifically in the sixth and seventh articles of chapter V, where it is defined and characterized, and the twenty-sixth of chapter VII. As a concept, the free multitude is integrated into the treatment of the problem of the best imperium, with which Spinoza dealt specifically in chapter V.

TP 5/6 defines the free multitude in two steps. First, a free multitude sets up an imperium whose end is peace and security of life — according to *TP* 5/2, the same aim as civil condition (*status civilis*). In other words, an imperium set up by a free multitude ends with human life in rational concord, as we can also read in *TP* 5/2 and *TP* 5/5. The imperium for rational concord established by a free multitude differs from the imperium acquired by the right of war, which is an imperium for domination and servitude.

Second, a free multitude is defined in parallel and in opposition to a subjugated one.[1] A free multitude is moved by hope more than by fear, it cultivates and celebrates life (*vitam colere*), and takes care of living for itself.[2] Contrarily, fear and hopelessness guide subjugated multitudes; they only want to avoid death, and their lives belong to the rulers who have defeated them.

Many of the *TP*'s difficulties arise from the incoherence between, on the one hand, this defense of a free multitude as the best imperium's constituent power, and, on the other hand, some features of the best imperia designed by Spinoza from chapters VI to XI, which mainly exclude servants and women from the ruling assemblies of the three forms of government and the social divides splitting an aristocratic society. The inquiry about these problems has also made the *TP* the source of fertile theoretical production around present-day politics.

My intention here is to discuss whether Spinoza's notion of a free multitude from the *TP* still has any political relevance. My answer will be that Spinoza's free multitude is a concept that we can use

[1] This recalls Machiavelli's distinction between free life and life in servitude in *Discorsi*, II, 2 (1997).

[2] In the *TP*, Spinoza gave the examples of the Aragonese, who freed themselves from the domination of the Moors (*TP* 7/30), and, with some problems, one of the Hollanders against Philip II (*TP* 9/14). In the *TTP*, where he had not yet coined the concept, the citizens of the States of Holland (*TTP* 18: 227–28) resemble a free multitude. The other historical examples he mentioned in the *TTP*, such as the Hebrew people of the first state (*TTP* 17: 212–21;18: 222–25), or the English people of that century (*TTP* 18: 227), seem to be a mixture between the free and the subjugated multitudes. In the *TTP* and the *TP*, the example of the subjugated multitude is one living under the power of an absolute monarch (*TTP* Pr: 7, *TP* 6/4).

to understand the political potential of current social movements. I will assess how pertinent Spinoza's concept of a free multitude is for current political discussions through Hardt and Negri's and Balibar's reflections. They distinguish themselves from the Marxist tradition they come from by thinking about political action that sprung from heterogeneity and that is not based on its refusal.

I will expose the virtues of the free multitude concept that I believe are most useful for social movements. I will then also use Hardt and Negri's and Balibar's theories to bridge the philosophy of Spinoza to the present day. These theories will then help me expose my views on the problems of Spinozan political theory that a contemporary democracy of the free multitude must solve. I will then identify the free multitude as the political expression of the common desire for understanding, and the subjugated one as the impulse of a common desire for ignoring. I will finally seek to bring together the positive impulse and realistic determination of Spinoza's free multitude. Social movements must hold these two extremes to achieve their goals; to grasp them, they must think of themselves as impure events.[1]

Social Movements and the Free Multitude

Social movements are displacements of the economic, political, ideological, or cultural structures of a given society, insofar as they result in a collective desire to transform or sustain these relations by means of organizing and mobilizing within an emancipatory project.

This general definition of social movements can be interpreted from different perspectives. I propose a Spinozist reading that provides an empowering self-understanding to social movements and distinguishes them from other responses to crises that aim to establish or re-establish relations of domination. What does the Spinozian concept of a free multitude offer to the current political theory of social movements and what now makes it an interesting object of political thought?

Three interconnected virtues of Spinoza's free multitude apply to social movements. One of the concept's main virtues is that it dispenses with any teleology. Social movements as free multitudes have goals; they are concerned with the future. It could not be otherwise; they are social actions and processes striving for social transformation, but they are neither a destiny nor do they have one. They are

[1] I am aware that some of these terms (common desire for understanding, positive impulse, realistic determination, or impure events) need to be explained. I beg the reader to have a little patience. I explain these concepts, as I use them, in the article's final section.

not heading toward an end that waits for them at the end of the road. Free multitudes put aside fate or teleology because their end is their *potentia*, their common desire for the common. Free multitudes are currently happening, not a future event already set; they are active realities endowed with an effective capacity. They produce effects in the here and now. Nevertheless, as Spinoza explains in *Ethics* (*E*3P8),[1] to produce effects also means continuing to produce them for an indefinite duration. Free multitudes entail that conditions of production be reproduced. If we talk about social movements as free multitudes, we mean that their reproductive dynamics is a cycle of liberation, and they are an expansive force of freedom and equality, common utility, and concord (*E*4P37S1 and S2). That cycle is their tendency. It does not tell us what social movements will accomplish, only what their actual horizons—their desires (*cupiditates*) as movements conscious of themselves (*E*3P9S)—are.[2]

The second virtue is that Spinoza's free multitude envisions social movements far from any essentialism. The social movements' essence, taken individually or in their encounters that can occur, is the same as their existence and power. Their essence is the power they have been able to bring together to transform the social relations upon which they would intervene.

Furthermore, the concept's essence does not derive from features common to the people who make up the movements, or from traits present in all the movements. Its essence is the irrevocable and multiple relationalities that constitute them, which they establish with the economic, political, and cultural institutions within and against which they intervene. Or, more generally, with the historical conjuncture in which they exist and produce effects (Balibar 2018). From this point of view, social movements are multiple in their composition and interaction with other actors or social dynamics.

Essentialism is the belief in the a priori unity of the diverse because it understands essence as that which all the different beings of a class or species have in common. On the contrary, anti-essentialism speaks about unity, union, or the encounter of the diverse as something that is never given beforehand, but as a project that we must make to happen. That is, if labor movement essentialism found worker unity as already given in their productive activity,

[1] *E*: *Ethics / Ethica ordine geométrico demonstrata*. Citations start with the part number. Then, Pr: *Praefatio*; P: *Propositio*, followed by the proposition number; also, with their number, C: *Corollarium*, S: *Scholium,* Ax: *Axioma*, D: *Definitio*, C: *Caput*. D after P and number: *Demonstratio*.

[2] One characteristic of contemporary social movements is precisely their struggle against visions that depict the future as an inevitable destiny. Hence the motto of the World Social Forum 2001: "Another World is Possible."

anti-essentialism is forced to pose what unites or can unite workers to defend their collective rights in a given conjuncture instead of confronting one another, as competition does in the labor market. The anti-essentialism thesis states that, in any case, we must always count on cooperation and conflict between singular human beings that compose social movements because both tendencies are irreducible. We understand that without a certain degree of cooperation, to speak of a social movement is impossible. However, as far as a social movement exists, it does not mean that there are no conflicting differences between its components. There is no social movement that is not crossed by internal divergences, and the relationship between them is often one of mistrust, animosity, or even hostility.

The third virtue is heterogeneity. Although Spinoza did not use the term, his *potentia multitudinis* and *libera multitudo* are notions that we can associate with a political action born out of heterogeneity. Heterogeneity in Spinoza's philosophy is ontologically present in the "infinitely many things in infinitely many modes" that follow from divine nature's necessity (*E*1P16). It also emerges in the impossibility of the essence being something common or of the common being an essence (*E*2P37). Essence belongs to the singular and composite human or nonhuman individuals that are in the infinite substance (*E*3P7). Thus, the common requires the encounter between singulars, that is, between different individuals. It can never be thought of as a priori (*TP* 2/13 and 14), but individuals always exist in connection. They necessarily engage in encounters of some kind (*E*4P18S; *TP* 6/1).

Hence, for Spinoza, heterogeneity does not necessarily mean dispersion. The heterogeneous, the diverse, and the singularities are a source of cooperation and conflict. In fact, the Spinozist political operation par excellence does not consist in setting aside differences, but in propitiating their encounter, working to compose them, and bringing them to agree and join forces to increase their power (*TP* 2/15). This increased power will be common when it circulates from the multitude to singular human beings and from these to the multitude in an expansive way (*TP* 3/7).

Spinoza did not think of the difference as negation. Negative definitions do not bring any explicative knowledge. According to Spinoza in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*TIE*, 2009: 92),[1] the right definition is the genetic or causal one. Therefore, differences are distinct effects of dissimilar intensity. The fact that the effects are different does not prevent them from being combinable. More-

[1] *TIE*: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect / Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, paragraph number.

over, understood in this way, as a different effect, the difference is a condition of combination and cooperation.

The intrinsic diversity of social movements — not only of their components or their indefinite number, but of their configurations, modes of articulation, and cultures — and the fact that they cannot exist unless they maintain a margin of autonomy among themselves and in the face of more rigid organizational forms such as political parties or state apparatuses (Tarrow 2011: 95–180), point to them as the most precise expressions of the free multitude of Spinoza today.

Additionally, if we speak of diversity intrinsic to the movements and of plasticity (at least relative) in their organization, then it is because the movements put into practice the experiences of assembly-based, participatory, and open decision-making (Offe 1985: 829–30). The democratic element is essential, and it is precisely in this aspect that reactivating Spinoza's philosophy proves to be a fruitful theoretical operation.

Balibar and Hardt and Negri's Theories of Heterogeneity

Balibar and Hardt and Negri identify this capacity for collective action that I call the "free multitude" with the social movements that have run through European and world history since the French Revolution (Balibar 2015: 131; Hardt and Negri 2009: 131–88).

Negri and Balibar's biographies are shaped by the political ruptures of the '70s, when the liberation initiative turned from the central axis of the labor movement to the eccentricity of social movements. I will now briefly review the theories of Balibar and Hardt and Negri on heterogeneity, which followed this political turn, to situate my argument in the context of current politics and to use them as a base to contrast my own proposal of how to understand this union of the heterogeneous. In any case, if the diverse concur, then it is as an effect of their own action as diverse (Balibar 2010: 51–52; Hardt and Negri 2009: 349–55).

For Balibar (2010), this effect is achieved through the iteration of the proposition of equaliberty (*la proposition de l'égaliberté*). To propose equaliberty is to affirm equality and freedom, one as a causa sine qua non of the other. There cannot be equality without freedom in the relations between human beings or freedom without equality, as the history of the last century would have shown in the regimes of real socialism and the capitalist world.

Although the defense of the necessary interdependence between equality and freedom can be traced in the history of political thought

from Cicero to John Rawls (Balibar 2015: 29–31), it becomes a historical event in the French Revolution and, more specifically, in the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, which summarizes its aspirations. Balibar (2010: 68) interprets the rights of man and the citizen referred to in the *Declaration* not as being, on one hand, the rights of man and, on the other, those of the citizen, but as the equaliberty that the *Declaration* proclaims: the right of man to politics, to citizenship or, borrowing the words of Hannah Arendt, "the right to have rights" (ibid.: 209).

To Balibar, all the subsequent worldwide liberation and equalization revolts are iterations of the French revolutionary proposition. Moving closer to our own times, all the liberation and equalization social movements that arose from the 1960s onward:

> Movements for "active" citizenship, political participation, and the abolition of exclusion, whether it be the exclusion of the poor or exclusions focused on anthropological differences;. . . movements to counter the anti-democratic effects of the monopoly of expertise and representation; and, finally, movements that tend to transform into open conflict (and as such into demands for *recognition*) the resistance and demands for justice by social groups that are being "excluded from the distribution of power" because of its monopolistic character. (Balibar 2015: 131)

These movements are different repetitions of the desire for equaliberty that became real in the French Revolution. Presently, Balibar (2015: 119) proposes to think of all these movements and their intertwining as a democratization of democracy that responds to neoliberal and ultraconservative policies.

Equaliberty is, therefore, an ideal. More specifically, it is a negative practical truth, consisting of saying no to non-freedom and non-equality. If we pose it abstractly, it loses all its value and falls into the void of mere negation. Hence, it can only be meaningfully proposed inside the historical complexity of a given conjuncture (Balibar 1997: 446). It also carries with it the same condition of existence as any concrete political action because it can only be produced from the singularity and multiplicity of the historical moment (Balibar 2010: 72). Balibar thus unites the hope expressed by the ideal character of equaliberty and the realistic determination to act in the face of circumstances; two qualities of politics that I believe Spinoza's *TP* left disconnected.

Balibar tied the third quality, the rhetorical one, to these two aspects. Identifying the rights of man and citizen allowed Balibar (2015: 83–101) to develop a dialectical concept of citizenship in-

volved in the tension (unity of opposites) between constitution and insurrection, institution and conflict, and constituted and constituent power. The rhetorical aspect is the discursive denial of conflict and its exclusion outside the space of actual power. It is the official discourse of the ordered society. To be "ordered" turns society into something perfectly representable in the cognitive and theatrical sense of the term, even its official dissents.[1] For Balibar, talking about rights (or even politics) is impossible if it is not in reference to their institutionalization. However, rights are neither achieved nor preserved if there is no active vindication of them that exceeds the institutional framework and its rhetorical mystification of order.

Within this tension live citizenship and social movements, namely, the contemporary-free multitude (Balibar 2015: 91). Their free character comes from their iteration of proposed equaliberty. Their diverse demands claim in an always new context the universal right to have rights. The context of today includes the powerful neoliberal and ultraconservative policies of commodification, privatization, precariousness, obsessive identity construction, and exclusion of the poor. The coincidences between movements in the negative practical ideal of their proposition of equaliberty and in their opposition to the political tendencies that deny it open the possible horizon of an encounter, which will be a conjunctural encounter in any case (Balibar 2010: 52).

The universality claimed by the diversity of movements in the diversity of situations is not an abstraction that leaves aside differences. For Balibar (2018), universality depends upon the concept of the transindividual, which he extracted, among other sources, from Spinoza's ontology. In political terms, the transindividual refers to a collective level of individual activity and an individual level constituted by collective interactions. From the transindividual perspective, universality is neither essentialist nor discursive, and it is practical insofar as the individual-collective relationship results in reciprocity and a mutual increase in power (Balibar 1997: 22). Equaliberty, or the human right to politics, as a practical universal principle here means not only working to enable everyone to experience the positive effects that collective interaction produces, but also endeavoring to ensure that everyone participates actively and positively in producing those empowering effects (Balibar 2010: 344–45).

Hardt and Negri prefer to think of these productive and expansive interactions through the concept of the common. They place the common in the transformations suffered in recent decades by the form of economic production. Capitalist production itself generates

[1] That is what Rancière called "police" (1995: 51).

the multitude and the common. Its recent transformations have led to a diversity of social movements, so that, according to Hardt and Negri (2000: 409–411; 2004: 103–15), we can identify the multitude as the post-Fordist working class.

They explained this historical change as the shift from the factory system to biopolitical production. The factory system — with its strict division between, on the one hand, the conception that plans the productive process and, on the other hand, its mechanical execution— has lost its hegemony and given way to immaterial labor, and to biopolitical production, which is already in itself a space of the common.

Purely manual or mechanical work has practically ceased to exist. At all levels, intellectual or cultural work predominates in its different forms: cognitive, affective, and imaginative. The common organizes productive process's three moments: its raw material is a common cultural heritage; the means of production are organs of a collective intelligence; and the product is a shared lifestyle. Productive planning is no longer necessarily divided between deciders and executors. Companies demand the cooperation of workers in organizing the productive process, and the division tends to occur at a higher level: between finance and production itself (Hardt and Negri 2000: 284–303; 2004: 145–53,196–208; 2009: 131–53.).

Hardt and Negri's idea is that social movements extend to political activism the capacities and ways of doing that are characteristic of new productive processes. The new proletariats appropriate the knowledge and attitudes they learn for production and apply them to direct intervention in political life. This is what free multitudes do; this is also what they can do to a greater extent and with increasingly liberating effects (Hardt and Negri 2009: 174).

The common that runs through all phases of biopolitical production, and which expresses itself in the transformative activity of social movements is already the action of the diverse as diverse. The common is the element of the multitude because it is irreducible to simple unity, it is neither essential nor symbolic, and it operates in a dynamic of singularities connected in the form of a network. As Hardt and Negri (2004: 198) put it, "singularities interact and communicate socially on the basis of the common, and their social communication in turn produces the common. The multitude is the subjectivity that emerges from this dynamic of singularity and commonality." The multitude expresses the constituent power of movements as the social forces capable of transforming contemporary reality in the direction of achieving greater *potentia* of all and for all (ibid.: 380–81).

The relationship between the common and the multitude might seem the utopian moment in Hardt and Negri's approach, but only if we understand it in isolation. Since *The Savage Anomaly*, Negri (1991: 175–76) had spoken rather of disutopia, in the sense that the multidude's *potentia* lives and expresses itself in power relations. The realistic moment is that *potentia* is not separated as by an abyss from *potestas*, and the multitude does not live outside the Empire. Its existence is not ideal, and it is the energy of an antagonism for freedom and fully human life. It is a movement, a process, and a revolt confronting, with more or less success, against the contrary developments of servitude and destruction (Negri 2012: 16–17).

One theoretical feature that differentiates Hardt and Negri's approach from that of Balibar is that there is only an ancillary place for the rhetorical moment. Presenting a part for the whole can be only a tactical response to a situation for which no other way of dealing with it can be found (Hardt and Negri 2012: 19, 20, 291). For Hardt and Negri (2000: 97–105), rhetorical representation reduces the multitude to a unity proper of the theory and practice of modern sovereignty whose reference can be found in the works of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes.

This difference between the two proposals is also shown in how they conceive of the political actors of emancipation. Balibar's citizenship, as a free multitude, and Hardt and Negri's multitude — which is, in fact, also the free multitude[1] — are both political actors that are produced and reproduced in the dynamics of their own political activity. However, Hardt and Negri conceive the multitude as the subject of history in an almost traditional sense. The multitude is the most advanced position of humanity in its tendency toward freedom, although humanity is not conceived from a transhistorical essence but from these same productive and constitutive, common and multiple tendencies that the multitude expresses (ibid.: 395–96). Balibar, however, understands that citizenship is a subject *in* history. For the French thinker, the conjuncture's complexity takes precedence over the historical subject and the social and political actors,

[1] In fact, Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude leaves no room to speak of a subjugated multitude. This inability likely stems from Negri's own reading of the multitude in *The Savage Anomaly*. In *Commonwealth* (2009), Hardt and Negri refer to the corruption of love and the common to explain the phenomena that Spinoza wants to capture in the notion of the subjugated multitude. There is, first, the making of the multitude and then its corruption: love against evil. Corruption explains servitude (Hardt and Negri 2009: 189–98). For Spinoza, the subjugated multitude is the result of war, "the end of a state (*imperium*) someone acquires by the right of war, then, is to be master (*dominari*); it has slaves (*servos*) rather than subjects" (*TP* 5/6). The difference between free and subjugated multitudes is that of between virtuous concord and domination.

who, if they are subjects, are so through representation (Balibar 2005: 92). For Hardt and Negri (2000: 402; 2009: 172–73), the subject or subjectivity is produced through an imaginative process, but this is no less productive and constitutive than the other processes of human creative activities.

Free Multitude Democracy

In both contemporary theories, the notion of a free multitude acquires a dimension that it did not strictly have in Spinoza. It is necessary to highlight this notion to assess the contemporary relevance of Spinoza and, above all, to assess the free multitude's aspiration to a democracy.

If Spinoza's politics has an unequivocally social facet, then it is because the rulers' right depends on the power of the multitude, which makes democracy the basis of all political regimes. Notwithstanding, in the *TP*, chapter XI, Spinoza proved unable to account for the need to democratize the social relations of which the multitude itself is composed and that emerge in an unmanageable way in his exposition of the democratic imperium.[1] Reactivating Spinoza's philosophy therefore requires the social dimension of democracy to be restored in its full scope. It is not only that the multitude's power defines the right of rulers, but that the multitude's power is in turn determined by the internal social relations of a non-individual, but collective nature. Abolishing these social relations that limit the *multitudinis potentia* is a task for the multitude itself, which, insofar as it strives to transform them into relations of solidarity, we can also call the "free multitude."

I believe that we must think of a free multitude democracy as a process not only because every kind of political regime can express, to a greater or lesser extent, the multitude's power, according to Spinoza's conception, but by virtue of the fact that the democratic task, the task of the common and of the reciprocity of rights, affects and is also affected by power relations that are not forms of government, but modes of production and subjection. Talking about a social process means talking about innovation and a common desire that produces social values and actively sustains the process through changing historical situations.

The free multitude thus acquires, at present, a variegated, kaleidoscopic, and entangled form that derives from the multiple character of the relationality conceived by Spinoza. This form endows

[1] Although the problem, as I mentioned, was already there in the previous chapters that deal with the best monarchy and the best aristocracy.

the free multitude, more in our context than in that of Spinoza, with an immeasurable or, better still, anonymous nature. If today's free multitude were a subject, then it would be a subject without a name or with too many names. It is more like an extended network of flexible, changing, and alive endings as it is not made up of fixed people or groups. Its composition also varies: some people connect for an intervention, others join for other actions, some acquire protagonism or leadership at one moment, and others acquire them at another time. The collective action that defines it is based on an inevitable degree of dispersion, which, instead of being a limit, enriches it and increases its power to affect and be affected. A free multitude is not a subject: it is a common active desire.

Can we think of the free multitude of today as a political vanguard, a new form of a party or a new elite? The free multitude is neither an immense minority, nor a majority, but rather an immense collective action producing common active desire. Neither avant-garde, nor party, nor elite, nor majority, the free multitude of today is a long and vital action in which many people participate, in many places and circumstances, with different degrees of commitment, over a long period, not always in unison or harmony, not always knowing about each other, not always successfully, and generally without recognition.

For this reason, the free multitude of today brings us *on this side* of the nation-state. It leads us to the transformative capacity of the social movements and mobilizations that overflow the party system. In addition, with the movements, it refers to social heterogeneity, that is, to the materiality of class struggles, patriarchal relations, systemic racism, ecological crises, and normative sexuality as dimensions that demand a real change. The free multitude also takes us today *beyond* the nation-state. It does not empty it, but it does decentre it. Presently, the multitude is transnational, as is the actual system of states, capitalism, and communication, and as are migrants or refugees. When Spinoza thought of the multitude in terms of territorial limits, he did so because those limits constituted the multitude's power or impotence. However, nowadays, the multitude's power flows through currents that exceed the territories and their administrative centers; and democracy must be thought out under these conditions. Finally, neither is the nation-state now the imperium that Spinoza had in mind, nor does the free multitude now exist outside of the state or before the state; rather it exists *with* the state. Hence, if the state ever had a power of democratic transformation that it has lost and if we want to recover it, then we must also think about it from the perspective of the free multitude's

power. On this side, beyond and with the state, the free multitude is too complex and elusive for a gridded vision of social space.

In contrast to the figures of collective action anchored in forms of class, gender, LGBTQ+, race, or popular-national identities that overpopulate the ideological geography of symbolic borders, the free multitude opens the way to a transformative action that operates according to the principles of common active desire, that is, according to the framework of Spinoza's hypothesis: liberation consists of striving with the free multitude for the freedom of the multitude, attending to the material conditions of life in common and the real processes of social transformation.

The Free Multitude and the Common Desire for Understanding

In my view, the notion of a free multitude is the political concretion of Spinoza's philosophy. More specifically, it is the figure suited to the desire for understanding (*cupiditas intelligendi*). For Spinoza, desire can have a rational motivation, and it is the very effort of the mind to understand and to go on understanding. From its mental perspective, the *conatus* is an appetite for knowledge that becomes conscious of itself in adequate ideas, that is, when the mind is active or is the adequate cause of its thoughts. The free multitude would then be an appropriate ecosystem for a collective and cooperative desire for understanding to develop. A desire for understanding or a strength of mind is the form of political freedom or self-rule (*sui juris esse*) as opposed to subjection to the rule of someone else (*alterius juris esse*) (*TP* 2/11). The common desire for understanding is then the form of collective political freedom. It integrates collective self-rule (*TP* 5/1), collective decision-making (*TTP* 16: 194, TP 9/14), and the collective knowledge we need to suppress the causes of domination (*TP* 5/7).

By contrast, the subjugated multitude is a common desire for ignorance. It is not only a multitude moved by fear, the avoidance of death, and the giving of one's life to another, but also guided by superstitions and hatred, sadness, and envy. It includes the features of the subjugated multitude of the *TP* 5/7, and those of the vulgar or the mob of the *TTP*.

The point is that a desire for understanding is a singular thing; thus, we must consider it from two simultaneous directions. It is known as a desire for the development of knowledge itself, a "desire for understanding for understanding sake" (Matheron 1988: 591). It is a desire that continues regardless of whether we know one thing

or the other, and that is not altered even by the knowledge of its own finitude, of its contingent existence in how Spinoza expressed it, for example in *E*4Ax1.[1] Propositions 4 to 8 in part III of *Ethics* apply to it as they do to all finite modes: a desire for understanding can only be destroyed by an external cause, it cannot accept the components of a contrary nature, it strives as much as it can to persevere in being, and that effort is its actual essence and implies an indefinite time. The difference is that a desire for understanding, as an adequate cause or active desire (*E*3D1, *E*3D2). It is conscious of itself as the cause of its effects. It is a true consciousness of the life of knowledge that goes on by itself. In addition, if it is a common desire, then it is a true understanding that this perseverance expands indefinitely through many minds, and the more and more diverse, the better. As a common desire, the desire for understanding is the positivity or eternity of the multitude's mental *conatus*, that is, of the multitude that acts as one mind (*TP* 2/21).[2]

Now, at this level and from this perspective, there is no domination and servitude; they are not even possible because we have left out the passions. If we were to consider this positive[3] impulse of the common desire for understanding on its own, then we would fantasize about a fabulous or utopian vision (*TP* 1/5).

Thus, we must consider the other side of the desire for understanding. This is also a desire for effective knowledge and for explanations of a reality that produce effects, which grasp the determinations of the world and themselves as determinations, among other determinations. A common desire for understanding cannot fail to be realistic. It is a positive impulse of collective knowledge and the effective knowledge of social reality.

We find Spinoza's ontological horizontality under both directions of the bifocal view. Horizontality, the elimination of all metaphysical hierarchies, is a theoretical condition necessary to think about a limitless common desire for understanding, together with an effective knowledge of a world made of interdeterminations.

As a positive impulse, a desire for understanding is in the part and in the whole, in the ideas and in the mind—the idea of the body—and in the multitude's quasi mind (*E*4P18S). It is the essence, or power, of a mode of thinking that expresses the nature of God in a certain and determinate way. The model of human nature that

[1] I follow here Macherey's (1994) and Del Lucchese's (2009) readings of part V of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

[2] For this translation of "*multitudo una veluti mente ducatur*," see Espinosa Antón (2011: 146).

[3] For this use of *positivus*, see Spinoza (*E*1P26D, *E*2P33, *E*4P1) and Tosel (2008).

our reason desires to create with the help of the imagination is a strategic or constructed universal that allows us to speak about a free man as one who acts out of reason (*E*4Pr), namely, one who is moved by the desire for understanding. As soon as it reaches the third kind of knowledge, the desire for understanding becomes an infinite loop (*E*5P26) and an intellectual love of God (*E*5P32C). In either of these forms, the desire for understanding excludes nothing, and everything could be understood. There is no metaphysical unknowability, and anything could understand. There is no cognitive exclusivity, and the "*homo cogitat*" of *E2*Ax2 neither affirms nor denies anything about what is not *homo*. Moreover, the capacity to understand increases the more singular desires cooperate in producing knowledge. From this point of view, a free multitude enters the plane of intellectual non-exclusion, and an infinite understanding, where all ideas, *quatenus ad Deum referuntur*, are true (*E*2P32); this includes, we must assume, all minds. The free multitude expresses, in politics, the full intelligibility and positivity of singular beings qua singular beings (*E*1P25C, *E*5P24; Macherey 1994: 134–37).

Nonetheless, a desire for understanding not only has an onto-epistemological horizon, to develop it is also necessarily linked to optimal historical and social conditions, which are also vital and affective determinations. A common desire for understanding inhabits a constellation of active common desires that are part of its essence. It does not exist without them, nor do they exist without the desire for understanding. It lives together with an active desire to be joyful and love, a desire to feel pleasant and to imagine freely, a desire to learn, and a desire to teach. It joins a desire to form the ideals of humanity, a desire to share them with others as a norm of life and a desire that all people should enjoy love of God or Nature. It is easy to recognize the free multitude as a political expression of this set of active desires.[1]

Historical Ground

So, we can ask ourselves the following question: What is the historical ground of this common desire for understanding as a positive impulse, which has expanded into a constellation of active desires celebrating life? Is it perhaps the ideal of the French Revolution and its *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, as Balibar (2010) put it, from which the proposition of equaliberty is iterated in

[1] In recent decades, the highest points of active common desire were probably reached by the "movement of movements" of the alter globalization struggle and by the *Indignados* and Occupy movements.

all subsequent and future insurrections? Is it the antagonism of the workers and its capacity to determine the development of capitalism, as Hardt and Negri (2000: 62; 2004: 153) wanted from their ontological perspective of the class struggle, reading positive impulse as constituent of productivity and creativity? Is it an inaugural event at all, whether described in these ways or others?

The positive impulse of a common desire for understanding has a historical basis but it is not an absolute beginning. Let us consider the *TIE*, 30–31.[1] The positive impulse has no utopian foundation. It is a historical product; it is a result and an intellectual tool, whose origin is lost in time, that is, whose first origin is irrelevant, because it would almost certainly be unrecognizable from the current resulting viewpoint. Any of the events to which we can refer: the development of democracy, philosophy, and mathematics in Ancient Greece, the new Galilean science, the brilliance of the Renaissance, the Dutch anomaly, the French Revolution, worker movement, the struggle for the emancipation of women, the abolition of slavery, the extension of public education, the institution of universal suffrage, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the independence of the colonized countries, environmental awareness, LGBTQ+ rights, Black Lives Matter — they will always be impure events. In Spinozian terms, the only pure event is the absolutely infinite substance whose essence involves existence, that is, the *causa sui* (*E*1P7D).

Events are impure insofar as when they occur they do not reach a total separation from that with which they break. Impure events always carry with them a trace of what they have left behind or aside, because that with which they break or from which they separate is also, to their regret or to their advantage, their condition of existence. They are always encounters between other encounters, and impure events challenge, in effect, the principle of identity. Depending on how we look at them, they are incomplete or excessive events and, in any case, dislocated ones. The events' impurity resides precisely in the fact that they do not fit with themselves. Perfect identity and difference (and therefore independence) from everything else are the two reflecting surfaces of an infinite mirror. What is lost or forgotten or excluded on both sides is the relationship of reciprocal causality. From the point of view of events' impurity, to be or to occur is to be or to occur in relation. There is no way of being this or that without some relationship; however, to be in relation, to be entangled in reciprocal causality, is to be displaced. The common desire for understanding is such an event. It is an idea, and a mode of thought, in terms of Spinoza and, more

[1] Here, I follow Macherey (1990: 48–52).

specifically, a common notion. It arises in a process of producing ideas not in a world without friction but in striving to persevere in being in circumstances that are not necessarily welcoming and not even receptive, and they can be very hostile indeed.

Any idea is an active part, to the extent of its power, of the cultural scene in which it intervenes. It actively participates in the conjuncture's construction, but as a part of it and never as its totalizing owner. It is also a part that is not unitary but internally heterogeneous and disjointed. Given that the idea forms an active part of the situation, it is always open to it; that is, the situation always exceeds the idea. Now, if the situation is always in excess with respect to the idea, then it is necessarily in defect with respect to itself. No conjuncture is fixed once and for all because it would have to be fixed by a consciousness external to the conjuncture and, ultimately, external to all conjunctures. That is what we have ruled out from the beginning. The situation, therefore, is never identical to itself. It is always disrupted, in crisis, and diverse; it is exposed to be transformed in a process of change.

As the idea is part of the conjuncture, a shift in the views that we project onto the latter will also mean recombining the relations of force that constitute it. However, we should be careful in this step. No situation or conjuncture is a "simple" context. When we speak of a conjuncture, we include in it the sedimentations with which the histories of all the forces acting in the current unstable crystallization affect the action. Therefore, to produce a displacement between the existing points of view about a conjuncture is a difficult task and requires that the attempt be accompanied by other conditions of diverse nature to achieve new sedimentations, new accumulations, and new points of rupture. On the other hand, although perfect knowledge of the situation is not possible, better or worse knowledge is. This cognitive difference will qualitatively modify the intervention to be conducted.

Accordingly, we must comprehend the common desire for understanding quatenus positive impulse from a common desire for understanding quatenus effective knowledge. We must approach its positivity as an explanation that captures the dynamic structures of the world and sees itself as a force among other forces. We must consider it from a realistic determination. That is what its internal gap—its transitional being and its heterogeneity—consists of.

Reflecting on the positive impulse then leads us to a realistic determination. However, the journey can also be made in the opposite direction. According to Spinoza (E2P44C2), we always explain reality by considering things as necessary, that is, from an eternal

perspective, as things are as necessary as the eternal nature of God. By E2P45, we must regard the necessity and eternity of the very idea of the common desire for understanding. E2P45 coupled with the definition of conatus in E3P7D formulates the unlimited expansion of the common desire for understanding. The idea of every real thing expresses, in a certain way, the infinite power of God's thinking and encompasses its own explanation. In this way, the common desire for understanding, as a realistic determination of what exists, is placed under the conditions of the absolute intelligibility of the real; this is like saying that it is placed under the absolute positivity of everything that exists and under the identification between reality and perfection (E2D6). In other words, there is also a realism in the theory that entails attending to the effective reality of knowledge as an adequate cause or positive impulse.

Conclusion

This logic of the double-reaching gaze with which I have analyzed the common desire for understanding, as if circulated on a Möbius strip, resembles what Balibar calls "dialectics," "unity of opposites," or "short circuit." My distance from his approach consists in applying this logic precisely to the common desire for understanding and to its political expression: the free multitude instead of referring it to the proposition of equaliberty. In this way, I avoid establishing the existence of ideal or absolute events, such as the French Revolution and its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

In short, Spinoza's free multitude is a concept that we can use to understand the political potential of current social movements. These are common desires for understanding as positive impulses, as realistic determinations, and as knowledge of the natural, material, and practical conditions of its perseverance in being. This means that they are impure events. For social movements, there is not just action, but also passion; not just convenience, but also conflict; not just a living present, but also a dead past; not just spontaneity, but also institutional structuring, and not just structuring, but also vital conditions that institute it and in which it produces its liberating effects. The conjunction of positive impulse and realistic determination generates hope. This is because, as *E*2P31C highlights, we can never be certain of singular things being effectively realized, and this margin of uncertainty means that the joy of the positive impulse is not constant.

Striving with a social movement means participating in the common desire for understanding at both ends, the positive and the

realistic. It implies turning the absolute universality of the real's full intelligibility into a practical task. It entails providing it with the optimal conditions for its development, that is, to give it life in a constellation of active common desires where it reaches its maximum power. It involves starting from and going through the determination of reality as it is: with its passions, its conflicts, its past, its need to organize social practices, and its urge to instil in every social organization the love of life.

Social movements' free multitude and neoliberal and ultraconservative servitude's subjugated multitude are not ontologically different. Both, along with all other things that exist, are impure events. They strive as much as they can to persevere in their being and necessarily come into relationship with other causes and between themselves. The difference lies in their power (potentia). Social movements are common desires for understanding; in contrast, neoliberal and ultraconservative servitude is a common desire to ignore. Above all, social movements know something that the subjugated multitude of today strive to ignore. They know that the multitude's power determines the common right, and they desire to increase that power, jointly and reciprocally, among the whole multitude. To put it another way, they are moved at the same time by their positive struggle for the multitude's freedom and by their realistic knowledge of the conditions of life in common and the processes of social transformation.

In this respect, a social movement's potentia will be greater the more its components think about achieving the movement's goals in cooperation with other social movements. The multitude's freedom refers to all of them as much as it does to the liberation of those groups in the multitude who prefer not to know. Conversely, contemporary society's realistic knowledge will tell us that such cooperation or liberation will not take place without dispute.

References

Balibar, Étienne (1994). "Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses." In *Masses, Classes, Ideas. Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson, 3–37. London: Routledge.

Balibar, Étienne (1997). *La crainte des masses: politique et philosophie avant et après Marx*. Paris: Galilée.

Balibar, Étienne (2005). "*Potentia multitudinis, quae una veluti mente ducitur*: Spinoza on the Body Politic." In *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Stephen H. Daniel, 70–99. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Balibar, Étienne (2008). *Spinoza and Politics*. Trans. Peter Snowdon. London: Verso.

Balibar, Étienne (2010). *La proposition de l'égaliberté: Essais politiques 1989–2009*. Paris: PUF.

Balibar, Étienne (2015). *Citizenship*. Trans. Thomas Scott-Railton. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Balibar, Étienne (2018). "Individualité et transindividualité chez Spinoza." In *Spinoza*

politique. *Le transindividuel*, 199–244. Paris: PUF.
Del Lucchese, Filippo (2009). "Democracy, Multitudo and the Third Kind of Knowledge in the Works of Spinoza." *European Journal of Political Theory* 8 (3): 339–63.
Espinosa, Francisco Javier (2011). "Être une multitude et agir comme une seule âme." In *Spinoza, ser e agir*, ed. Maria Luísa Ribeiro Ferreira, Diogo Pires Aurélio, Oliver Feron, 129–51. Lisbon: CFUL
Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri (2004). *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin.
Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri (2009). *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri (2017). *Assembly*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Macherey, Pierre (1990). *Hegel ou Spinoza*. Paris: La Découverte.
Macherey, Pierre (1994). *Introduction à l'*Éthique *de Spinoza. La cinquième partie. Les voies de la libération*. Paris: PUF.
Machiavelli, Niccolò (1997). *Opere* I. Ed. Corrado Vivanti. Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard.
Matheron, Alexander (1988). *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
Negri, Antonio (1991). *The Savage Anomaly. The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
Negri, Antonio (2004). "Reliqua desiderantur: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza." In *Subversive Spinoza. (Un)contemporary Variations*, trans. Timothy S. Murphy, 28–58. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Negri, Antonio (2012). *Spinoza e noi*. Milan: Mimesis.
Offe, Claus (1985). "New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics." *Social Research. An International Quaterly* 52 (4): 817–68.
Rancière, Jacques (1995). *La mésentente. Philosophie et politique*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.
Spinoza, Baruch de (1972). *Opera*. 4 vols. Ed. Carl Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters.
Spinoza, Baruch de (1985). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. 2 vols. Trans. Edwin M. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Spinoza, Baruch de (1999). *Oeuvres III. Tractatus theologico-politicus/Traité théologique-politique*. Ed. Fokke Akkerman. Trans. Jaqueline Lagrée and Pierre François Moreau. Paris: PUF.
Spinoza, Baruch de (2005). *Oeuvres V. Tractatus politicus/Traité politique*. Ed. Omero Proietti. Trans. Charles Ramond. Paris: PUF.
Spinoza, Baruch de (2009). *Oeuvres I. Premiers écrits. Tractatus de intellectus emendatione/Traité de la réforme de l'entendement. Korte verhandeling/ Court traité*. Ed. Filippo Mignini. Trad. Michelle Beyssade y Joël Ganault. Paris: PUF.
Tarrow, Sidney G. (2011). *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 3rd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Tosel, André (2008). "La finitude positive." In *Spinoza ou l'autre (in)finitude*, 157–72. Paris: L'Harmattan.
Zourabichvili, François (2008). "L'énigme de la 'multitude libre'." In *La multitude libre. Nouvelles lectures du Traité politique*, ed. Chantal Jaquet, Pascal Sévérac and Ariel Suhamy, 69–80. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam.